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SUBJECT: CJTF-HOA BRINGS EDUCATION TO DISADVANTAGED MUSLIM
GIRLS

REF: Nairobi 001072

Sensitive-But-Unclassified. Not for release outside USG channels.

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On April 6, DCM, accompanied by COL Wendy Fontela, Political Advisor, CJTF-HOA, dedicated the new girls' secondary school in Bute, Wajir North constituency, in Kenya's under-developed and almost exclusively Muslim Northeastern Province. This school was the local MP and the community leaders' top priority, despite the other obvious development needs. At approximately USD 250,000 the school is the largest CJTF-HOA Civil Affairs (CA) project to date in Kenya. Historically, few girls in Wajir are educated and only a handful has ever attended secondary school. Approximately 500 community members observed the dedication ceremony. Presentations by local students included a dramatic presentation of a family debate on allowing girls to go to school and also songs thanking America and the U.S. Military (and praising the Kibaki administration despite the fact that Bute and all of North Eastern Province are opposition strongholds). Interacting with the DCM and COL Fontela, (likely the only foreign women and among the few professional women they have ever spent time with) the girl students quickly opened up with questions about life outside of Wajir and enthusiasm for pursuing dreams of professional careers. The Bute Girls' Secondary School is an example of a CJTF-HOA CA program contributing to a number of Mission priorities on Muslim outreach, support for girls' education, and enhancing Kenya's internal security. We are offering important development assistance in a region much neglected by the GOK. At the same time, such projects need to set the stage for longer-term interaction with these communities and avoid becoming political currency for local politicians.
END SUMMARY.

THE PRIORITY OF GIRLS' EDUCATION

2. (U) On April 6, DCM, Ms. Leslie Rowe, accompanied by COL Wendy Fontela, Political Advisor, CJTF-HOA, dedicated the new girls' secondary school in Bute, Wajir North constituency, in Kenya's under-developed and almost exclusively Muslim Northeastern Province. Bute is in a primarily Somali ethnic area in northern Wajir that has a long history of violent tribal clashes. The community has tribal connections to both Ethiopia and Somalia. (See Reftel for additional background on Wajir's economic disadvantage.) At approximately USD 250,000, the school is the largest CJTF-HOA Civil Affairs (CA) project to date in Kenya. The Bute community turned out in force for the ceremony. The students from the school were grateful and excited about the opportunity to continue their education. Currently, fifteen girls from Bute and fifteen from other areas have already begun their studies as the first class, holding their sessions in a classroom at a local primary school. In May, when the school year recommences and the Bute Girls' Secondary School officially opens, the class will total 45, the maximum capacity for one class, about half of which will come from other parts of Wajir. Forty-five new students will form entry classes in each of the coming three years. The school's headmaster is already concerned about the pressures that will come as early as next fall when he has to refuse entry to deserving girls due to limited capacity. This is only the third girls' secondary school in all of Wajir, and only the eighth in the entire Northeast province. CJTF-HOA CA has supported all three schools in Wajir and is currently considering projects at Girls' Schools in Garissa and Mandera West.

3. (SBU) During the CA team's initial visit to Bute in October, the constituency's Member of Parliament (MP), Dr. Abdullahi Ali, and the village elders made clear that creating this school was their number one priority, despite the other obvious development needs, such as adequate water, decent roads, communication with the outside world, secure food supplies, competent health and veterinary care,

and relief from an ever-present threat of ethnic clashes and raiding from neighboring groups in both Kenya and Ethiopia. Dr. Ali and the community leaders have maintained excellent relations with three successive CA teams and Embassy liaison officer over the past seven months. Dissenting opinions from the community on building a girls school, whether out of concerns about losing traditional roles for girls, or a preference for other needs, have not been expressed publicly to date. (Although when asked, both Dr. Ali and other leaders admit that such opinions do exist.) The contractor for the school was hired locally, and, by all accounts did a timely and masterful job, even exceeding the terms of the contract for building capacity. His extra effort reflects the spirit of the community and the broad support for this project.

THE DEDICATION - PLEADING FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION

14. (U) The dedication ceremony was a joyous and colorful occasion with over 500 community members watching, clapping, and dancing, despite sitting for over an hour in temperatures in the 90s. Reflecting the conservative tone of the community, the women and children were divided from the men and older boys. The senior chief of the village reminded the gathering that in the past (mostly in the 1970s) USAID had done a number of projects in the area, including the building of schools, small dams, and other infrastructure. He "welcomed the U.S. government back to Bute," and remarked that despite our absence, the people of Bute have "remained friends with America." The District Education Officer used the occasion to remind the audience of Kenya's continuing struggle against gender inequality.

15. (U) The highlight of the dedication (in addition to the wrapping of DCM and COL Fontela in traditional Somali cloth), were the performances by local students. The students from the new school sang songs of welcome and thanks to the U.S. Army and Marines. They also presented a moving dramatic piece about a girl's desire for education despite her "father's" objections -- based on the fear that the girl would forget her culture, start wearing trousers, and turn away from her family. An "Advocate" echoed the girl's pleas, demanding she be allowed to "go to school, choose what she wants to do, and choose her own partner." In the end the father saw the light and the girl was allowed to go to school like her brothers.

THE U.S. MILITARY IS WELCOME - HOW ABOUT THE MP?

16. (U) Also during the dedication ceremony, students from one primary school and the boys secondary school greeted the DCM and Col Fontela by performing a welcoming song with the hit line (and apparently new appellation) "We are Butarians and Butarians are you!" They also presented individual appeals on the importance of education, the need for economic assistance, and concerns about security. The final performance was by Bute's other primary school and it included the (unintentional) comic relief: a long, obviously original song with a chorus praising "Kenya's Rainbow" and verses honoring President Kibaki and a number of his National Rainbow Coalition ministers, while Hon. Ali, a staunch supporter of the opposition KANU party (as is all of Northeastern Province) looked on as the uncomfortable recipient of chiding and scorn by the Kenyan officials and elders present.

THE GIRL STUDENTS - A DOOR HAS OPENED

17. (SBU) Prior to the forming of the first class in January, only five girls from Bute were attending secondary school, all boarded outside the constituency. [NOTE: This initial class conducted their first term at Bute's girls' primary school, anticipating the May opening of the new secondary school and not wanting to miss the chance to complete the school year. END NOTE.] Over the years, the number of girls from this area that have completed secondary education is miniscule (community leaders could not recall an example - especially if a girl had gone away to school and not returned to the family since she would be soon "forgotten"). It is unlikely that any girls from Bute, and perhaps none from all of Wajir district, have gone to university. Only a handful of boys from Wajir have qualified for university over the past few years.

18. (SBU) Given the opportunity to lunch with the DCM and COL Fontela (likely the only foreign women and among the rare professional women they have ever interacted with), the girl students quickly overcame their severe shyness and engaged with the guests of honor with questions about life outside of Wajir and with obvious enthusiasm for the

opportunity to pursue their dreams. To a girl they wanted to succeed in school and move on to become doctors, lawyers, pilots, and businesswomen. Despite the hardship of their pastoralist lives, these young women (at least by community standards, most of whom are 15-16 years old and with cohorts already married), were smart and forward-looking.

THE NEW SCHOOL

19. (SBU) The school infrastructure includes an administration building and library, four class rooms, a dormitory, a kitchen and dining hall, two sets of showers, and eight pit latrine toilets. All furniture and staff requirements are in place for the school's official opening in May. A number of other contributors have committed to the school's completion: Honorable Dr. Ali is dedicating some of his federally-allotted Constituency Development Funds to furnish the administrative and staff offices. Bluebird Aviation, a private air charter company, has donated 45 beds and mattresses for the first class. They also made a commitment to donate an additional 45 beds and mattresses in following years, as the school grows beyond its initial Form I class. [NOTE: Please protect the firm's name as it prefers to make this donation anonymously. END NOTE.] UNICEF has made a commitment to contribute desks and chairs to the school as it grows beyond its current capabilities.

110. (SBU) The school has some additional infrastructure needs, which the CA team is working to address, perhaps in partnership with another donor. These include the construction of a high quality fence around the schoolyard to protect against intruding livestock, wild animals, and, as the Hon. Dr. Ali noted, "the threat from human male animals." Until the fence is completed the students will continue to sleep in a dormitory at the Bute Girls' Primary School. The other pressing need is for a new water source. Currently, Bute has no functioning deep boreholes, and all water is collected manually from shallow wells of questionable quality. The CA team will assess whether it is more effective to cooperate on the drilling of a new borehole at the school site or help rehabilitate an existing borehole to have the capacity to pipe water to the new school.

COMMENT: AN IMPORTANT MISSION OUTREACH

111. (SBU) The Bute Girls Secondary School is an extremely worthy project that compliments a number of Mission priorities on Muslim outreach, support for girls' education, and enhancing Kenya's internal security. Because of security and logistic concerns, it could only be done through the CJTF-HOA CA program. Kenya's North Eastern Province is much neglected by the central government, and CA projects make an important contribution to specific development needs in isolated and needy communities. These interventions also raise the profile of the U.S. in the minds of the locals, and provide an opportunity for positive interaction with military as well as Embassy personnel.

COMMENT CONTINUED: IMPACTING LOCAL POLITICS?

112. (SBU) At the same time, we need to be aware of our potential impact on a community's balance of power. Hon. Ali is a frank, enjoyable interlocutor who is very supportive of the CA teams' efforts and access. He originally had a sign made for the school that read, "The U.S. Marines Bute Girls Secondary School," and outfitted some of the dedication participants in t-shirts extolling the role of the U.S. military in the project. He is also quite open about the positive impact the new school can have on his political standing in the community, despite having to endure the primary kids' "Rainbow" song. The pressure for him now is to assure that the school is a success and that the structures, which should be functional for thirty years, do not become an empty legacy of a community's failure to promote equality between girls and boys. For the Embassy and CJTF-HOA it is important to not allow these projects to generate excessive political capital for specific politicians, unduly influencing a constituency's natural political process. The nature of CA projects makes this a concern. Projects are selected through consultations with MPs, District Officers, and other government officials, unlike the Ambassador's Self Help program, which solicits project ideas from community-based organizations. The rapid timeline for CA projects also encourages the active participation of MPs.

13. (SBU) Despite these considerations, the dedication of the Bute Girls' Secondary School was an overwhelming success and excellent proof to ordinary Kenyans of U.S. interest in helping poor communities. Our delegation, headed by two women holding positions of prominence in both protocol and command, undoubtedly impacted this culturally and religiously conservative community. For the girl students, anxious to enter the broader world through learning, and ambitious to pursue a more rewarding future than their mothers, this was a potentially life-changing experience. For some in the community, this blast from the progressive outside world was no doubt troubling, and their true reaction was likely in line with the "Father's" in the play. Many parents here will not allow even their brightest girls to go to school, for some, not even to primary school. For the wider community to accept and appreciate the school and the implications of girls' education it will be important that they witness concrete benefits to their community and the students' well-being. For this to happen, we will encourage the long-term participation of CJTF-HOA to continue these important projects. We will also look for additional resources and partners to help us maintain contact, access, and cooperation with Bute and other disadvantaged areas of Kenya. END COMMENT.

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